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The Minor & Major Sins

By Zayn al-Din Ibn Nujaym al-Hanafi

There is much disagreement amongst the giants of islamic scholarship with respect to what constitutes a major sin (*kabira*). Without going into the details, as that is not the purpose of this post, what many scholars cautiously settled on was a number around seventy. Such listings are instructive as they allow us to judge our lives and actions to see where we are in our religious practice. As one of the *salihin* said: Righteous works are performed by the pious and corrupt alike, but only the truly sincere avoid sin.

Ibn Nujaym, the famed Egyptian *faqih* and author of *al-Bahr al-Ra'iq* and *al-Ashbah wa al-Naza'ir*, has a beautiful short treatise on major and minor sins (*Risalat al-Sagha'ir wa'l Kaba'ir*). This is noteworthy as it is a Hanafi work which speaks from the *madhhab* vantage point. Interestingly, it is actually formally compiled by his son as Ibn Nujaym himself only drafted the work and didn't complete his final copy before his death. It also has a commentary by Shaykh Isma'il al-Siwasi. May Allah Most High shower His Mercy on them all.

What follows is a draft excerpt of the epistle containing his listing of one hundred major sins. I hope to complete the rest of the work at some point, insha'Allah, with perhaps some further notes as a number of the points require further explication or clarification. What one may think one has understood from a certain point could be an error as the conditioning is sometimes to exclude it from the major sins (and not from being a sin altogether); but then there are also further unstated details.

In the Name of Allah, Most Merciful and Compassionate

As for the major sins — I ask God Most High for pardon and well-being from them — he [t: my father] said:

After (1) disbelief, they are:

(2) fornication,

(3) sodomy,

- (4) drinking wine, even if only a little which does not intoxicate,
- (5) drinking fermented date drink until intoxication, yet whilst deeming it to be impermissible,
- (6) being present with sinful people,
- (7) theft,
- (8) murder,
- (9) making a false accusation of fornication,
- (10) concealing a testimony when one is obliged to offer it,
- (11) bearing false testimony,
- (12) swearing an engulfing oath,
- (13) misappropriating the amount of the quantum of theft from a rich person,
- (14) misappropriating any amount from a poor person,
- (15) fleeing from the battlefield without genuine excuse,
- (16) accepting usurious gain,
- (17) [t: wrongfully] consuming the wealth of an orphan,
- (18) bribery,
- (19) offending parents,
- (20) severing familial kinship ties,
- (21) deliberately forging a statement against God's messenger, God bless him and give him peace,

- (22) deliberately vitiating a Ramadan fast, without deeming it to be lawful to do so,
- (23) giving less than what is due of volume or weight items,
- (24) deliberately offering a prescribed prayer before its time,
- (25) and delaying the prayer beyond its time,
- (26) withholding the zakat payment,
- (27) postponing the fasting of the month of Ramadan to a later month without genuine excuse,
- (28) omitting the hajj pilgrimage when fully able,
- (29) striking a Muslim wrongfully,
- (30) cursing any of the Companions,
- (31) speaking ill of the scholars or bearers of the Qur'an,
- (32) reporting a Muslim to an oppressor,
- (33) being a wittol,
- (34) being a procurer,
- (35) abstaining from commanding the good or forbidding the evil, when reasonably able,
- (36) learning sorcery,
- (37) teaching sorcery,
- (38) practising sorcery,
- (39) forgetting [t: how to recite] the Qur'an,

- (40) burning an animal frivolously,
- (41) a wife's withholding herself from her husband's sexual advances without due right,
- (42) despairing of God's mercy,
- (43) feeling secure from God's devising,
- (44) consuming the flesh of unslaughtered meat
- (45) consuming the flesh of swine,
- (46) talebearing,
- (47) slandering someone who is not publicly sinning,
- (48) gambling,
- (49) tyrannising others,
- (50) a leader's abandoning of the truth,
- (51) a man's likening his wife to one of his permanently unmarriageable kin,
- (52) armed robbery,
- (53) persisting in a minor sin,
- (54) assisting in sin,
- (55) encouraging vice,
- (56) a lady's singing in any manner [t: based on the idea that her voice is from her nakedness — it is not],
- (57) unveiling one's nakedness in the hammam,

- (58) miserliness leading to non-fulfilment of mandatory financial payments,
swearing an engulfing oath [t: this is not numbered as it is a repetition in the text]
- (59) favouring ‘Ali over Abu Bakr and ‘Umar,
- (60) suicide,
- (61) causing permanent damage to a limb, and this [t: suicide] is greater in sin than one who kills another,
- (62) not avoiding urine,
- (63) reminding recipients of one’s charity,
- (64) making hurtful comments to a recipient of one’s charity,
- (65) denying predestination, and ascribing the works of individuals to themselves without the involvement of their Maker and without recognising the fact that predestination is by His Command,
- (66) believing a fortuneteller
- (67) believing an astrologer,
- (68) making insinuations regarding someone’s lineage,
- (69) slaughtering an animal for a person,
- (70) [t: for a man] hanging one’s lower garment beneath the ankles out of arrogance,
- (71) leading one’s child to misguidance,
- (72) inaugurating a reprehensible practice,
- (73) pointing a sharp weapon at another person, even if only whilst jesting,

- (74) being argumentative and picking apart words without due right,
- (75) castrating a slave,
- (76) cutting any of a slave's limbs off,
- (77) torturing a slave,
- (78) being ungrateful to the kindness of a benefactor,
- (79) withholding excess water [t: from others],
- (80) violating the Sacred Precinct,
- (81) spying [t: to find fault in people],
- (82) eavesdropping,
- (83) playing backgammon,
- (84) playing *talib* [t: a certain ancient game],
- (85) playing mancala,
- (86) playing every game which is consensually agreed upon as being impermissible,
- (87) Haskafi included consuming hemp from the major sins in his poem,
- (88) a Muslim's saying to another Muslim: O unbeliever!
- (89) being unjust in time-division between multiple wives,
- (90) masturbating,
- (91) engaging in intercourse with a menstruating lady,
- (92) being joyous at the rise of prices of goods for the believers,

- (93) engaging in bestiality,
- (94) a scholar's not acting in accordance with his knowledge,
- (95) selling ruined food [t: deceptively],
- (96) dancing to a rebec,
- (97) loving this world,
- (98) looking lustfully at the face of a handsome young boy,
- (99) peeping into the home of another person,
- (100) entering another's proper without permission.

...

The implication is that all other sins are minor. Although every sin requires an immediate act of repentance, minor sins are wiped away by a variety of good works, as the Holy Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) informed us in numerous traditions (*ahadith*).

And Allah alone gives success.

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